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ABSTRACT

School districts are cultural systems that may be classified along a continuum from homogeneous to heterogeneous according to the diversity represented in their cultural composition. School boards are the decision-making system that, given the competitive federal, state, and local demands, decides on the particular educational policies and programs available to a cultural system. As such, school boards are meta-mediators in public education. While the school board may respond in either elite or arena council fashion, the tradition of school boards in America dictates an elite council process. This kind of council action provides a poor fit between such boards and the multicultural nature of most urban school districts. The arena type action is a poor fit with homogeneous cultures. Boards that do not fit with the culture of their district are not effective as meta-mediators. The model suggested here provides an opportunity to evaluate the fit between the culture of the school board and the culture of the school district. (Author/IRT)

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THE SCHOOL BOARD AS META-MEDIATORS

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Introduction

Public education is beset by competing and often conflicting demands. The federal government develops one strategy and exerts pressure for certain changes and programs. These pressures are felt in the form of court decisions, federal appropriations, and agency interpretation of those pressures and the administration's biases (I hesitate to dignify them with the term policy). At the state level, the department of education pressures for some type of action, usually only vaguely related to the federal pressure, in concert with or occasionally in conflict with state legislative enactments and the governor's proposals about how public education should be operationalized. These pressures carry particular weight for it is the state which actually has the responsibility and authority to operate a public education system.

City government applies one form of pressure in fiscally dependent school districts and in another form in fiscally independent districts. This is, in part, because education is still largely funded with local taxes. In one way or another the local funds necessary to operate a public school district affects and are affected by the funds necessary to operate other city government agencies for all such agencies raise their revenue from the same basic local tax source.

The clients of the local district are many and varied in nature. They

include groups of people with children in public schools; in other schools; yet to be in school (below age 5 or 6); having no children; whose children are out of school (over ages 18 or 19); employed persons; unemployed or retired persons, and a multitude of other classifications including persons from varied socio-economic, educational and cultural backgrounds. All have their special interest in public education. Every special interest group in the district is a pressure or potential pressure group.

In addition to these groups, external to the local school bureaucracy, there exist powerful political pressures from the professional bureaucracy itself. The most prevalent manifestation of this pressure is the teacher's organization or union whose vehicles for applying pressure are within the framework of labor relations; i.e., negotiations, grievances, mediation, arbitration and strike. But even when teachers are united in a single powerful unit they will, particularly in large cities, fragment into other special interest groups, such as Irish, Italian, Catholic, and Black forums and caucuses. Principals, guidance counselors, coaches, elementary teachers, secondary teachers and special education teachers have their own agenda and methods of influence. Separate bureaus in large cities have their own particular interests to protect and enhance. Most professionals also have their separate state and national organizations that bring various forms of pressure on local boards to make decisions beneficial to their particular membership.

Given this multitude of pressures from the proliferation of sources at every hierarchial level, the local school board must in the final analysis decide upon the policies that will establish the specific educational program within that district. School boards are Meta-Mediators!

A Utopian Model

A Meta-Mediator is a decision-making system that processes all the competing demands; organizes, reorganizes, modifies, generalizes, eliminates, emphasizes and, in general, reshapes these demands into an operational decision involving, usually, the distribution of limited resources. Easton (1965) has provided one model that may be viewed as describing the process of meta-mediation. Briefly,this model describes the political process of receiving inputs (demands); processing these competing demands for scarce resources; deciding how the resources will be allocated; disseminating the decisions (policy output); and monitoring the affect that decision has on the future actions of original demand systems (feedback). Easton's model is clearly based on the general systems model developed by von Bertalanffy (1950) and others who have followed in the general systems tradition. In Easton's model that element which depicts the process of receiving demands, and producing a decision, describes the work of the meta-mediator. In public education in the United States this function is relegated by the federal government to the states and delegated by the states (in all but a few states) to local school boards. Thus, Lutz and Iannaccone (1969:77) have called the local school board "the focal subsystem" of educational decision-making for it is here that the competing demands are operationalized into educational action that affects clients. It is in this context that local school boards are Meta-Mediators.

From A Utopian to Operational Model

Easton's model describes the theoretical, "ideal-typical," or utopian process of meta-mediation. Operating in this fashion, the school board seeks and receives all demands related to the educational process; they process these demands with the justice and patience of Zeus; and produce

a decisional output that meets the needs, values and aspirations of each of th- demand systems. Of course Easton does not claim any political decision can be so utopian but the model provides for that process. School boards, however, are not composed of gods. Their decisions are not so just, although they may try. Certain demand systems are often unheard and some systems are seldom satisfied with the educational decision outputs of the board as operationalized.

In a three-year study of the New York City School Board, the authors conclude in their unpublished manuscript that the board is not a closed system but a malfunctioning open system, receiving thousands of demands (inputs) and producing thousands of decisions (outputs), but the decisions often appear to have little relationship to the original demands. They conclude the "modulation" or feedback-feed-forward process described in the Easton model is overloaded, outdated and incapable of producing meaningfu outputs in terms of the demands. The system cannot function properly. So most school boards function imperfectly in their role as Meta-Mediators. Nevertheless they do function as Meta - Mediators every time they decide.

One example will serve to explain the fact that local school boards are Meta-Mediators. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided that "separate but equal" in education was illegal. They directed that school districts move "with all deliberate speed" to correct that illegal inequality. They did not direct how they should do it or when it should be done. But they provided a pressure. State human relation commissions and federal organizations (formal and informal) pressured particular local school boards to make this or that decision. Twenty years later segregated education is more a fact in many urban schools than it was at the time of the Brown decision. Boston and Philadelphia, to name two, are under state directive and federal pressure to "provide a plan" for desegregation. But in their

role as Meta-Mediator they are hardly providing what anyone calls desegregated education while Detroit, San Francisco and Charlotte, N.C., all seem to have different but acceptable programs of desegregated education.

It appears then that local school boards do perform the role of Meta-Mediator. Either because of or in spite of demands and pressures from various sources, they decide what education will be for their local clients. What is needed then is a model that will allow some evaluation of the effectiveness of the function.

Toward An Operational Model

Elsewhere this author has taken the position that school boards are social-cultural systems and operate as subsystems of the social-cultural configurations they are elected or appointed to serve (Lutz 1975a, 1975b). Lynd and Lynd (1929), Warner (1949), Hollingshead (1949), and Vidich and Bensman (1960) all described how school boards reflected a particular set of values and beliefs, a cultural system, and operating upon these, advantaged one cultural subsystem and disadvantaged another with their decisions. That research, along with the more recent work of others such as Sexton (1969) and Coleman (1966), has produced a close look at the programs of education (the outputs) and influenced these outputs to some extent. It has, however, inspired little concern and even less change in the governance processes of local education. We have been more concerned with what is happening (outputs) than in how it happens, (Meta-Mediation process).

Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 defines Meta-Mediation as a political-cultural process. How does it modify Easton's model? It states that the process is not merely political but cultural as well. It makes explicit that all political decisions are made in a cultural context; that demands (inputs) and decisions (outputs) are made in the context of values, aspirations, knowledge, beliefs, available resources (components of culture) by persons from one culture or subculture, for a more generalized macro-culture they presume to serve. Thus, every output tends to advantage one subculture, for a more generalized macro-culture and disadvantages another. This model then is in total conflict with the long assumed belief that public education serves a monolithic "American Culture" and that the public schools are and should be the flame for the melting pot within which Americans are homogenized into one great and single mass of values, aspirations, needs, etc, called the American Culture and epitomized by the American Dream.

The Culture of School Boards

For years the school board of New York City was composed of an equal number of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants. It was assumed that this composition would effect decisions that would reflect the concerns of the dominant religious groups of the City. Thus, with respect to religion, the school board was composed so as to reflect the culture of the City and presumeably produce decisions that would not disadvantage one or another group.

But to fail to disadvantage someone is not the same as to meet their needs. The long and deeply held belief of the reform board movement dictates that no board or board member should act in the interest of any single group. Additionally, boards of education have been led to believe that their wisdom, if not omniscient, is, at least, superior to that of special interest demand groups.

Edward Tuttle wrote his revised edition of School Board Leadership in America after 10,000 copies of the first edition had been sold and used in approximately 3,5000 local school districts. As former executive secretary to the Narional School Boards Association his words not only reflect but have shaped what may be referred to as the "Culture of American School Boards." Tuttle states:

> Each [school board] member must represent impartially all the people of the community.
>
> Each must perform his service as a board member without bias of any kind in favor of his own interest or the interest of any restricted area or segment of the population. (Tuttle 1963:21)
>
> The school board knows before anyone else which way the schools are going and has the obligation of keeping the people aware of educational needs and opportunities in its community. (Ibid: 27)

Put another way, the belief system and values of the school board culture dictates behavior that assumes the board knows the educational needs of the community and should keep them informed of their needs (rather than the reverse): that a cultural free board member should operate in terms of that homogeneous American Culture (that does not exist); and that no board member should reflect the special interest of the subculture of which he/she is a member. In this tradition, school boards have generally operated within established cultural parameters of school boards. Their decisions have tended to advantage the middle and upper classes of America from which they come.

Cultural Conflict

In the three-year study of the New York City Board mentioned above, we practically never saw a board member operate to the advantage of a particular constituency whether that be religious, economic racial, ethnic or other. The religious composition of the New York City Board did not disadvantage the religious subcultures but neither did it strive to serve the particularized interests of these or any other interest group.

Enter Figure 2 about here

In Figure 2 subsystems M-Z represent the large number of cultural subsystems that comprize the local school district, having differing and sometimes competing needs, values, etc. The larger circle in the center represents the school board that presents intself in public as a consensual unit. Each cultural subsystem is attempting to influence the board, expressing its values and aspirations in terms of demands. The board receives these not as individual members representing cultural constituencies but as a unified board. The smaller circles inside the inner circle are board members A-I, interacting with themselves and the superintendent K, mediating all demands and differences in order to present a united front to the public. The arrows 1-7 represent such consensual decisions in terms of what is good for the generalized culture not in terms of the good of specific subcultures that comprize the school district. Given that the board is supposed to know the educational needs of the community and keep them informed of them, the attempts at influencing the board by the subcultures M-Z are at best a minor distraction and at worst seen as partisan politics.

The type of "council" decisions represented by Figure 2 is termed by F. G. Bailey (1965) as "Elite" council behavior. An Elite council perceives itself as separate from and "the guardian" of the people. It resolves differences, comes to a consensus and makes decisions in executive session. Public ritualistic enactment of these deicisions are almost always unanimous, for the miority withdraw in favor of the "common good," which is consensus and the preservation of the public image of the board (to paraphrase Baily). In such situations the disenfranchized (particularly the poor) become disenchanted with the council, feel "worsted" in their attempts

to obtain justice, and are hardly likely to work for the good of the school district. Here again we paraphrase Bailey, using the school district as s specific example.

Cultural Correspondence

Bailey proposes another council type, that of "Arena" council. Figure 3 depicts the decision-making behavior of an Arena type school board in a heterogenous culture.

Enter Figure 3 about here

In Figure 3 a school board operating in an Arena decision-making fashion is described. Outer dotted circle (a) is the mercurial single culture actually comprised of many subcultures M-Z, occasionally and under particular conditions communicating and operating together to influence school board decisions, dotted lines (c). Solid lines 1-4 represent the pressures of the macro-culture in an effort to influence public education. These pressures affect subcultures M-Z of the school district and the school board differently as indicated by the dotted extensions of the solid lines. The school board itself, represented by the inner dotted circle is not a solid front in opposition to and separate from the school district but a subsystem of the cultural system, made up of nine members A-I. Each of these members represent particular subcultures, as represented by the solid lines between themselves and the subcultures M-Z. According to Kupper (1971) "they are community in council." To again paraphrase Bailey, they are always looking over their shoulder to determine if they are correctly

representing their constituent sub-communities. The process of deciding is one of debate and counter-debate and decisions are not unanimous but are made by majority decision, as indicated by I and II. The coalitions that constitute those majority decisions (I and II) will change according to the conditions and the particular decision being made. The superintendent, K, is executive officer of the board. As such the superintendent assists in the council making the decision, but does not participate as a decision maker on the council. Once the decision is made the superintendent, as executive administers the decision. While most would adhere to this "ideal" role for the school superintendent, all informed persons know that is not generally how it happens. The superintendent's role in Figure 2 better describes the present superintendent-board relationship. In Figure 2 the superintendent is direct influence in the board decision, though not as a voting member, surely a chief influencer of the board and often as nominator of persons who run for board membership. On the other hand, the board takes a direct role in determining and effecting the operational specifics of the decision (administration). While superintendents have long decreed this administrative interference of school boards, they informally accept it as payment for their role in determining the decision. (Callahan 1966:28-30)

What is proposed then is a model through which one can examine the nature of the school board as a political-cultural subsystem of the larger cultural system it presumes to represent as a Meta-Mediator. When there is "fit" between the cultural system of the board and the culture it serves the Meta-Mediating function of that board can operate well. When and to the extent there is lack of "fit" the Meta-Mediating function of the board cannot be responsive.

It is not contended here that all school boards must be Arena councils in order to effectively function as Meta-Mediators. Figure 1 depicts a pluralistic cultural system and an Elite council -- a poor fit. Figure 2

depicts a pluralistic culture and an Arena type council -- a good fit. But, all school districts are not multi-cultural, at least to any great extent. Many, particularly small rural districts, are rather homogenous in nature. Figure 4 portrays an Elite type school board in such a homogenous school district.

Enter Figure 4 about here

The large circle in Figure 4 represents a school district with a homogenous culture, for instance a small school district in the Mid-West. Ninety-eight percent of its residents are white, upper-lower or middle-class, and most parents say they want their children to go to college and 70 percent do. High school sports events capture the enthusiastic interest of 20,000 of the 35,000 residents on a football Saturday. The eight Protestant churches in the community are well attended on Sunday.

The demands on the school board (lines 1-5) represent a generalized value structure about children, education and the schools. No one would think about objecting to the Protestant oriented prayer said prior to every athletic event. The consensual decisions of the school board (lines a-e) are consistent with the needs and aspirations of the homogenous culture they represent and serve. The two percent of the population atypical of the culture, (A) - the rich and powerful, who have direct representation on the board and, (B) - a few lower class Blacks and Mexican Americans, are not disposed to or powerful enough to try to change things. This Elite council school board is an effective Meta-Mediator, the cultural "fit" is good. An Arena type council in this culture (not diagramed here) would be a poor "fit".

Conclusion

School districts are cultural systems that may be classified along a continuum from homogenous to heterogeneous according to the diversity represented in their cultural composition. School boards are the decision-making system that, given the competitive federal, state and local demands, decide upon the particular educational policies and programs available to that cultural system. As such, school boards are Meta-Mediators in public education. This relationship is defined in Figure 5.

Enter Figure 5 about here

While the school board may respond in either Elite or Arena council fashion, the tradition of school boards in America, the school board culture, dictates an Elite council type process. This type council action provides a poor fit between such school boards and the multi-cultural nature of most urban school districts (line 4). Also Arena type boards are a poor "fit" with homogenous cultures (line 3). Thus such boards tend to be ineffective in their role of Meta-Mediator. Elite type school boards are a better "fit" with the more homogenous culture possible in many rural areas (line 2) and Arena type school boards provide a better "fit" with heterogeneous urban cultures (line 1). Such boards are more effective as Meta-Mediators.

The model suggested in Figure 5 provides an opportunity to evaluate the "fit" between the culture of the school board and the culture of the school district. As these are more congruent school boards are more effective in their important roles as Meta-Mediators.

Implications

Based on the model presented, several hypotheses can be generated that might be tested in future research.

The Meta-Mediation function of the board is the best indicator of the demand-response "fit" between a school district and its school board. As such it should be the best indicator of any social-cultural gap existing between the school district and its school board (Iannaccone and Lutz, 1970: 85-88). Therefore, what is described as "ineffective" in the Meta-Mediation process should predict school incumbent defeat. The following hypotheses are offered:

1. In communities that have more heterogeneous cultures and school boards that operate in Elite fashions there will be a high degree of school-community conflict and/or school board incumbent defeat.

2. In communities that have more homogenous cultures and school boards that operate in Arena fashion there will be a high degree of school-community conflict and/or school board incumbent defeat.

3. In communities that have more heterogeneous cultures and school boards that operate in more Arena type fashions there will be public conflict, resolved by majority vote, but the conflict will be contained within the political process. Incumbent defeat will be less than that observed in hypotheses 1 or 2 and incumbent defeat will occur not because of the ineffectiveness of the Meta-Mediation process (not due to conflict between the board and the community) but because of conflict between a board member and his/her specific constituency.

4. In communities that have more homogenous cultures and boards that operate in more Elite fashions there will be little school-community conflict and little school board incumbent defeat.

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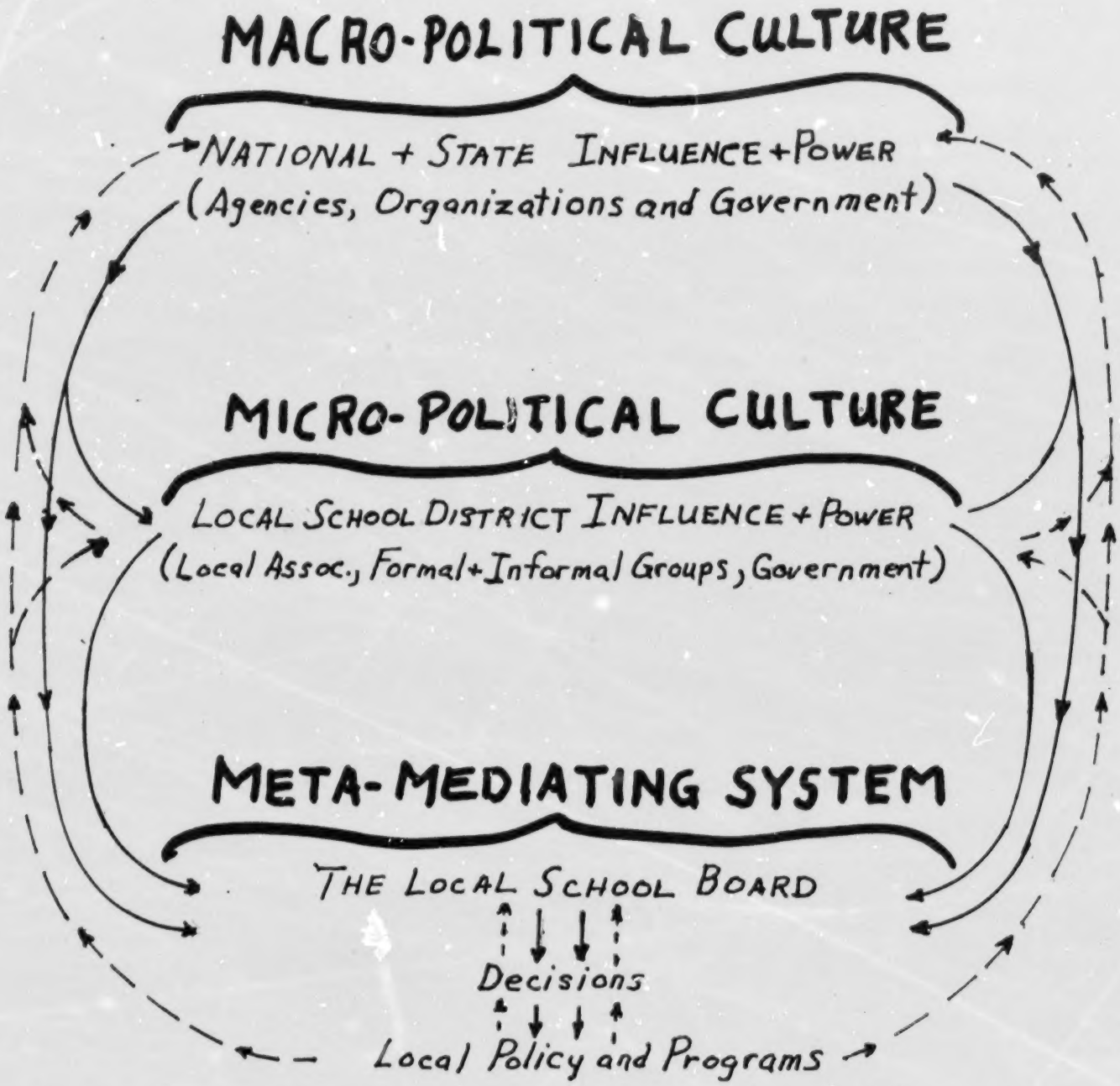

Figure I: THE POLITICAL-CULTURAL PROCESS OF META-MEDIATION

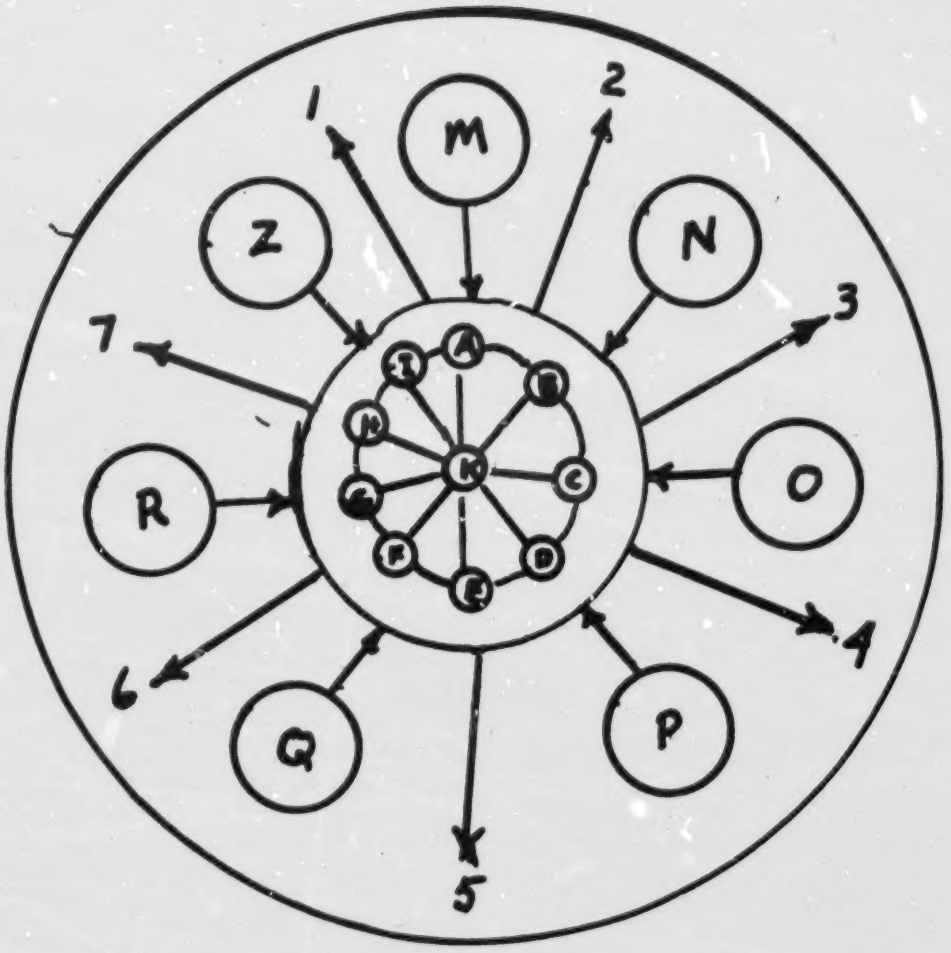

Figure 2: The Cultural System Of American School Boards

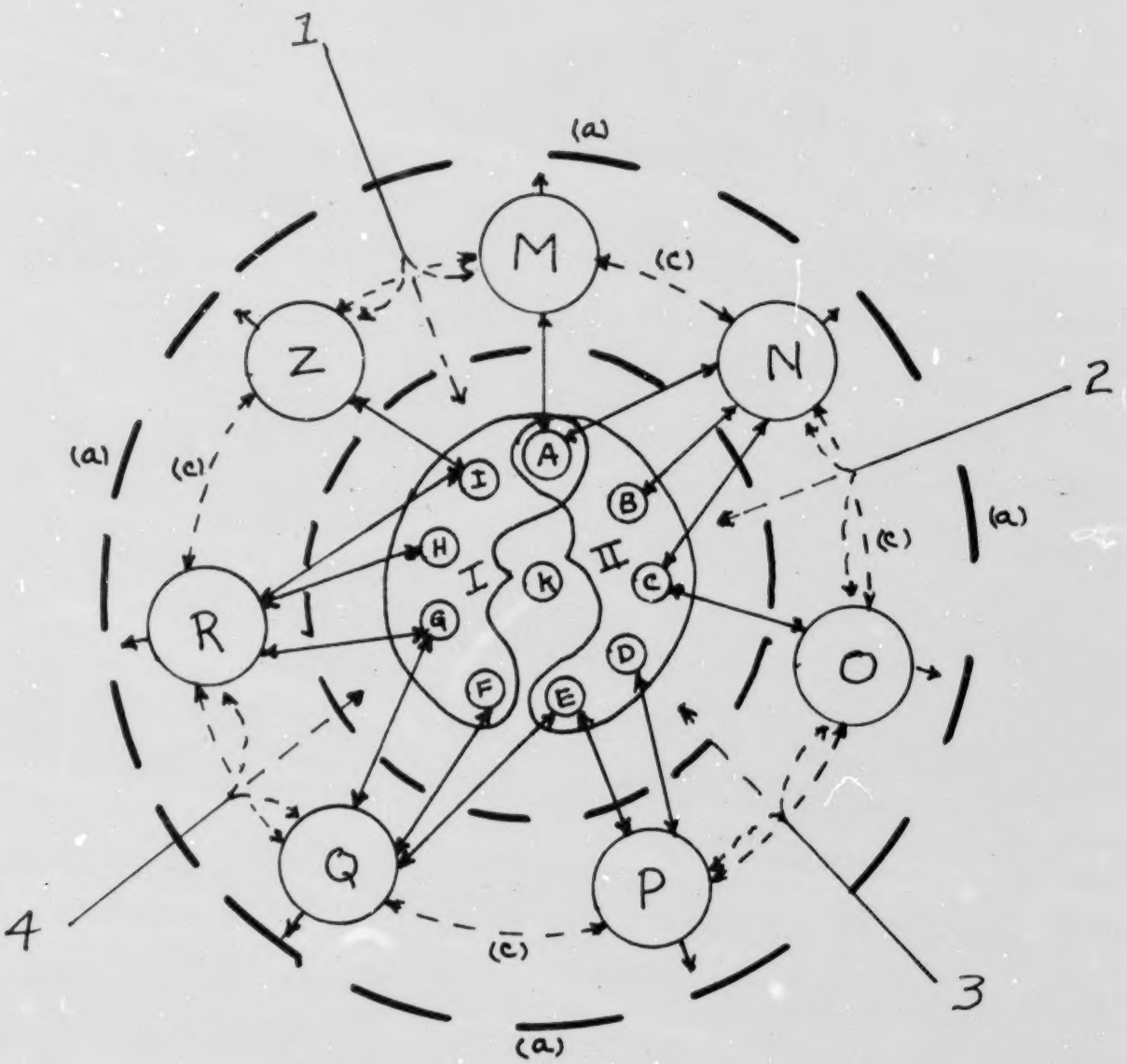

Figure 3: Alternative Political-Cultural System Of A School Board

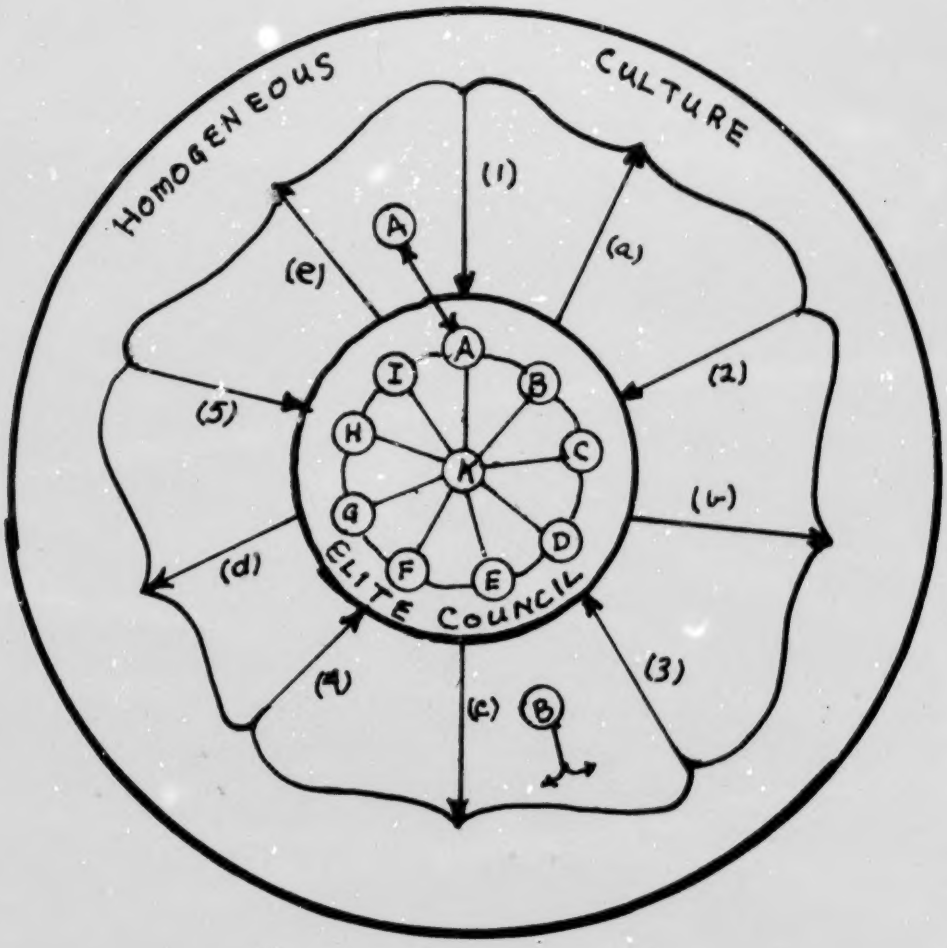

Figure 4: THE ELITE COUNCIL IN A MONOLITHIC CULTURE

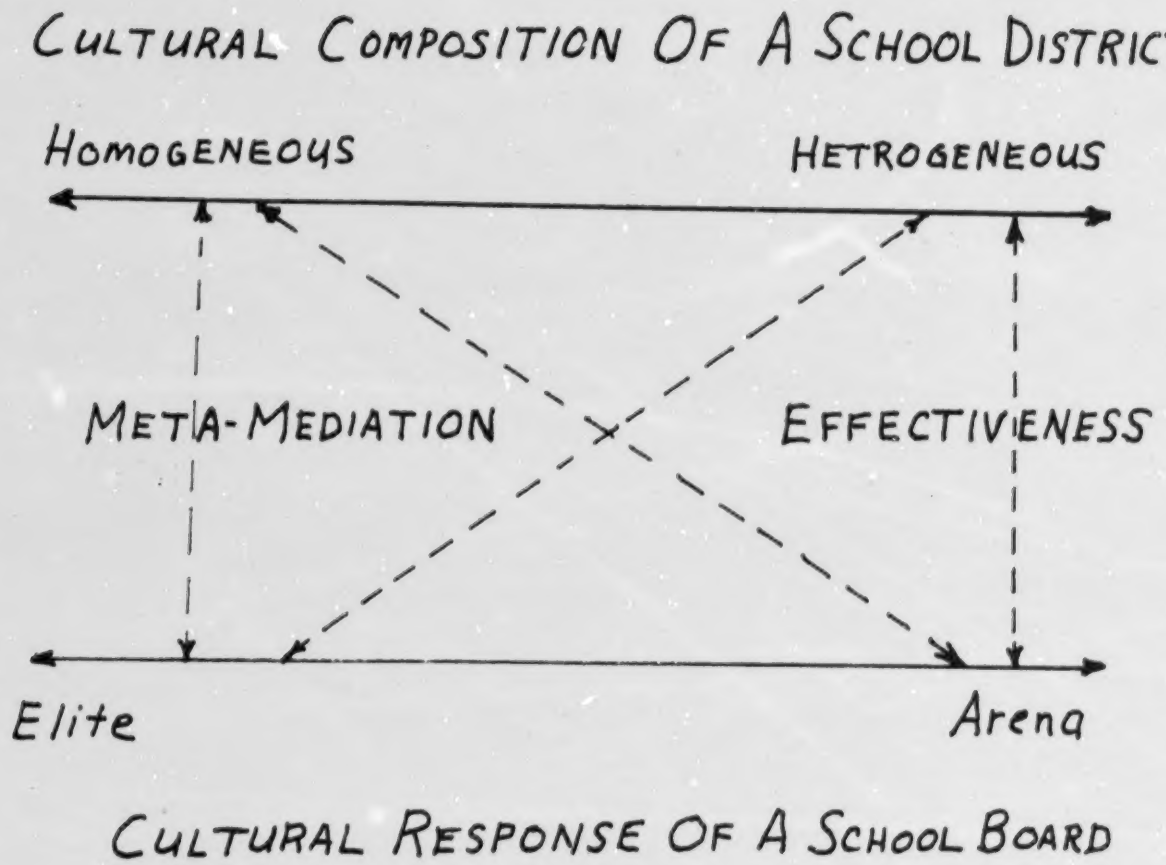

Figure 5: EFFECTIVENESS MODEL FOR META-MEDIATION